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Disorder as Order: The Ethno-Nationalist Struggle of the Karen in Burma/Myanmar—A Discussion of the Dynamics of an Ethicized Civil War and Its Historical Roots

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After being classified as a totalitarian-ruled, less-developed country as well as a fragile state ridden by ethnic conflict, Burma suddenly saw its “democratic spring” in 2011. The question is whether a new and more democratic order will be allowed to develop. At the time of this writing, the so-called ethnic conflicts have not found a political resolution. Despite three years of negotiations for a nationwide ceasefire, there is a civil war in Kachin State between the army acting on its own and the Kachin Independence Army, resulting in an estimated 100,000 internally displaced persons.¹ Additionally, there is ongoing religious strife between Buddhists

1 The Burma Campaign UK, January 2013, and Kachin informants. Negotiations for a ceasefire continued after heavy fighting in December 2012. Fighting broke out in Kachin State in 2011 when the army sent reinforcements into the state to guard dam constructions. The army continued its offensive in 2012 despite a letter from President U Thein Sein to stop the war. On the conflict in the Kachin State, which has spread to the Shan State, see Sadan 2013, and Wai Moe 2014.

and Muslims in Rakhine State and a nationalist xenophobic anti-Muslim campaign spreading to other parts of Burma.² Is the violence an expression of nationalist violence with historical roots in colonialism, or is it orchestrated in order to demonstrate the necessity of military rule and state of emergency? In Karen State, there is a preliminary ceasefire. However, minor clashes between the Burmese army and the Karen National Liberation Army has occurred. It is one thing to stop the violence; the difficult part, however, is going *beyond violence* in a political solution.

Religion, ethnicity, and nationalism are important ingredients of the 65 years of identity politics and conflicts in Burma, and seem to form a complex process of disorder. Religion is a major source of identity in the historical process in Burma, uniting as well as dividing. Is the combination of ethnicity, religion, and nationalism the origin of violence or how do we explain the prolonged violent conflicts? Or has violence become the driving force behind ethnic and religious incompatibilities?

This article focuses on the conflict between the Karen (Sgaw and Pwo), and the governments in Myanmar/Burma since 1949.³ I will argue that violence is a continuation of a disorder since colonial intervention in the 19th century. Violence and victimhood have become a substantial part of the

2 See further Gravers and Ytzen 2014. The Kachin signed a ceasefire agreement in 1994. On the ceasefires between the military regime and ethnic groups, see Zaw Oo and Win Min 2007.

3 The non-Burman ethnic groups make up about 33 percent of the country's population. The Karen ethnic category is composed of about 10 to 12 groups and several subgroups, depending on who is doing the categorization. Sgaw and Pwo are the main groups speaking different but related languages. Sometimes the Pa-O and the Kayah are included, but these groups do not subscribe to the Karen category politically and use independent identifications, although the Kayah clearly is a Karen-speaking group. Kayah State has the highest Karen diversity: Kayah, Kayan (Padaung), Kekhu, Brè (Manö), Geba (Bwe), Monnepwa, Zayein (Latha), Pakü (Sgaw) and Yangtalai; see Lehman 1967. Most Karen consider the term "Kayin" in Burmese derogatory. Thus, ethnic definitions are highly contested and fluid. "Kayan" seems to be a recent term.

Karen ethnic and religious identity, and the history and narratives about the conflict have to be dealt with in a process of political reconciliation as part of the ongoing democratization. Thus, this article is more detailed on historical events than on recent events.⁴

The Karen—A Segmented Society

Following an interim ceasefire in 2012, in 2014, the Karen National Union (KNU) engaged in serious ceasefire negotiations with the new government as part of a nationwide agreement. KNU president, General Say Mutu Poe, often traveled to Naypyidaw and seems to have developed close relations with the army chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. However, some in the leadership of the KNU were skeptical about the intentions of the Burmans: “Bamars have cheated us so often—is this a trap?” they asked in a recent interview.⁵ There is a fundamental mutual ethnic distrust, which dates to the Panglong Agreement in 1947. The Karen were not included in the agreement and did not achieve autonomy that would allow for the formation of an independent Karen State. The British colonial protector deserted the Karen and did not keep their promise, according to KNU historical memory. Moreover, internal fragmentation and division in the leadership among the Karen also play an important role in the conflict. Saw Mutu and his faction currently lead the KNU, but the hardliners remain skeptical—even about Mutu’s intentions.

Historically, the Karen—Pwo and Sgaw—have been segmented between hill and valley, urban and forests, Christian and Buddhists as well as various syncretic movements. Furthermore, they are divided between those engaged in the armed struggle and those living among and cooperating with

4 On the recent history, see Thawngmung 2008 and 2012; South 2011; Smith 1999. On Karen identity politics, see Harridan 2002.

5 Interviews with KNU leader in Thailand and NGO leader in the Karen state 2013–14.

Burmans, the silent Karen (the majority?), often viewed as traitors (see Thawngmung 2012). In recent years, they are also divided between three armies: The Karen National Liberation Army (Christian-led), Democratic Karen Buddhist or Benevolent Army (Buddhist-led), and the Border Guard Force (Burman army or Tatmadaw-led) plus several splinter groups (details below), as well as four political parties. Yet the Karen are united in their custom (*ta a lu a la*), myths, national symbols, such as the flag, the bronze drum and buffalo horns, as well as by historical experience and aspiration of autonomy. Thus, the segments oscillate between unity and fragmentation. People often neglect this dimension because the ethnicized view of the conflict is based on a reified identity of the Karen, the Chin, the Kachin, etc. However, the Karen also share a common narrative of having suffered under Burman rule.



Religion and arms: Karen National Defense Organization soldier and a Baptist pastor in front of a village church, Papun area (Photo courtesy of Vinai Boonlue).

They refer to an imaginary based on myths, religious cosmology, and historical events in which the Karen figure as victims, the betrayed, those deprived of knowledge and leadership—symbolized in the widespread use of the orphan as a metaphor of their plight.⁶ Leadership is based not only on age and knowledge, but also often on ritual knowledge combined with special moral power and personal charisma. Religious prophets and charismatic religious leaders still have a large following. This is perhaps not a tendency only found among the Karen, but in a process of social segmentation, this type of leadership seems to generate a continuous political fragmentation. The Karen follow religious leaders who provide them with new rituals as protection against suffering. They became Buddhist when their ancestor spirits could not protect them.⁷ They became Christians because they felt that neither Animist ritual sacrifices nor donations to monks could protect them against evil spirits and misfortune. In other words, the strategy is to follow the leader and take a new ritual, which offers a relief from suffering, a new moral order, and protection. Although this imaginary could be seen as a reduction of Karen agency to a cultural essence, I believe it is very much substantiated in the literature on the Karen as for example Yoko Hayami, who emphasizes the prophetic leadership.⁸ Charismatic leaders play a significant role in the conflict; they mobilize people—but they often also divide the Karen. Thus, the conflict between the Karen and the Burmese state/military has been fuelled by internal conflicts and divides among the Karen. The longevity of the conflict, I will argue, is very much a product of Karen imaginary of their future autonomy and of notions of leadership, which has gained support from influential foreign circles and organizations. This, however, does not mean that the Karen are only

6 The orphan without parental ritual guidance has to become morally strong in order to take up leadership; see Gravers 2012a.

7 Vinai Boonlue (2012: 5) has discussed religion and leadership.

8 See Hayami 2011 and Gravers 2012a.

relying upon millenarian ideas; they apply modern political ideas and aspirations of democracy as well.

In the following, I hope to demonstrate how the segmentary dimension, the imaginary of leadership, and moral order influences Karen agency as a determining function—an imaginary strongly represented in the social and historical memory of the violent history among the Karen. Before we proceed to the history of the conflict, it is necessary to provide a brief theoretical discussion of violence and victimhood in order to outline the central mechanisms of this conflict.

Dynamics of Violence and Victimhood

The practice of violence, like all actions, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world.

—Hannah Arendt 1969: 80

A conflict and armed struggle such as the Karen “revolution” as KNU calls their struggle, is often termed “ethnic” and perceived as if the ethnic dimension is the determining factor and an internal substance and quality of ethnicity. As Roger Brubaker has argued, the “ethnic quality” of “ethnic violence” is not intrinsic to acts of violence, but emerges through after-the-fact interpretations.⁹ We have to search for the mechanisms at work in a long historical and political process in order to discover the heterogeneous elements of prolonged conflict with “ethnic violence.” We cannot explain this kind of violent conflict in a simple theory of grievances, cultural deprivation, or primordial ethno-nationalist feelings. As Stathis Kolyvas states: “Violence is not just a degree of conflict but a form of conflict.”¹⁰ Civil war in Burma is a violent conflict and became “ethnic” in a long historical process. Likewise, Bettina F. Schmidt and Ingo W. Schröder have argued the use of violence cannot be explained by structural

9 Brubaker 2004: 111, 115.

10 Kolyvas 200: 2.

or material causes alone. It is a complex process consisting of both objective conditions and inter-subjective intentions and actions that generate violent conflicts: "There exists no more important resource for an ideology of violence than the representation of past violence, former, dead, loss and suffering."¹¹ Thus, while social memory is crucial in the perpetuation of violence and nationalism, religion and ethnicity often function as vehicles of such memories and imaginaries of future violence. However, we have to consider the politically orchestrated use of such vehicles of violence, since nationalism, religion, and ethnicity do not generally have violence as intrinsic values. Nationalism implies defense of sovereignty and legitimate rule and perhaps fight for a territory and often encompasses and integrates religion as substantial elements of the nationalist ideology.¹²

Violence is a sign of the failure of political power or failed democracy, according to Hannah Arendt and Michael Mann—not a natural extension of politics and power.¹³ Violence in Burma has been accompanied by fear and mistrust—fear of the military regime and fear amongst the officers, that is, fear of revenge from the opposition or fear of their superiors. As Daw Aung San Suu Kyi famously wrote, fear corrupts all parties.¹⁴ This fear and mistrust often develop into paranoia so that any change in a conflict is also viewed with profound fear. During the extremely long civil war and military dictatorship, violence has entered daily relations and has become a routine that is misrecognized as unavoidable and necessary for continued existence and ontological security. The simple logic is like this: We cannot trust the opponent who uses violence and will destroy us; we have to hit

11 Schmidt and Schröder 2001: 8.

12 Mann 2005: 6.

13 Arendt 1970, 42 ff. emphasizes that power, force, strength, authority, and violence are different phenomena. See also Scheper-Hughes and Bourgeois 2004 for discussions on violence in different political contexts.

14 Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2012. Fear was widespread among officers. Aung San Suu Kyi 1991: 180.

back. Stanley Tambiah explains how violence is “routinized” in ethno-nationalist conflicts.¹⁵ Use of force attains its own autonomy, becomes efficacious in the reproduction of ethnic identity and solidarity, and finally violence becomes synonymous with a righteous cause (i.e. defense of identity, culture, nation, and state). Violence thus becomes part of the identification of the other, of “the enemy.” In the process, the role as victim or perpetrator/aggressor appears as an important dimension of identity as we shall see. Social suffering and victimhood dominate the narratives and gain a prominent place in the political imaginary, *in casu* in the Karen National Union and its representation of its armed struggle since 1948.¹⁶ “Victim” or “victimhood” is a moral category of those who are traumatized, but it is also a political category on which we can base our claims of rights, compensations, and recognition (of sufferings, autonomy, sovereignty, identity, and other political claims). It is very much about the “true” image of the whole conflict and struggle. The problem with the victim/perpetrator dichotomy is that one group/person can contain both roles depending on who makes the classification. In this way, the “victim” also takes on the role of perpetrator of violence in a process of *schismogenesis*, a concept which anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1967) used to define escalating violence in a process that brings the parties further and further apart. This means that each violent act generates an even stronger response, deepens the divide, and exacerbates the incompatibilities between ethnic parties. It is a complementary process of violence explained by ethnic differences. In this process, insecurity manifests itself in both a direct, material way: food, health, personal, and political security, as well as in a symbolic (loss of culture) and ontological way, i.e., a sense of general fear of disorder, chaos, and death.

15 Tambiah 1996: 230.

16 On the concept of social suffering, see Kleinman, Das and Lock 1997; Kleinman 1995. Kleinman replaces “victim” with social suffering instead of individual explained traumas. Suffering authorizes nationalism and ethnic resistance, and victimhood is commoditized (1997: xi).

The perception of Karen victimhood is supported by numerous publications with titles such as: "Secret Genocide, The Karens of Burma: Victims of War" (by R.P. Winter, who was director of the US Committee for Refugees).¹⁷ The term "genocide" is often used in the text about the Karen. It is a difficult term to apply due to its references to the Holocaust. It can be discussed whether the Karen and other ethnic groups have suffered attempts of genocide. I believe this is an exaggeration and prefer to define the situation as ethnic cleansing in the Karen (and Kachin) State, such as when the army used its "four cuts strategy."¹⁸ However, the sense of profound suffering and victimhood is strong in all pro-KNU publications and has been used to mobilize aid.

In a pamphlet from 1992, the Karen are portrayed as being persecuted for their ethnic identity and "enslaved" by the Burmans and having "suffered untold miseries in the hands of their Burman lords." Furthermore, the Burmans had a "genocidal scheme" during the Second World War. Their own historical narrative of the exodus from Mongolia and later their persecution by the Burmese are related, as background, and the Karen are believed to have arrived in 739 CE.¹⁹ A KNU article from 1986 recounts the migration story, and claims it has been confirmed and accepted by a majority of scholars (KNU 1986: 2). The Karen then came under the despotic and chauvinistic Burmese rule until the present, killing and looting Karen civilians (KNU 1986: 2). Pamphlets by Michael Lonsdale and the KNU repeated the narrative of

17 In a report published by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (2007), and written by Benedict Rogers, has crusade rhetoric in its title: "Carrying the Cross: The Military Regime's Campaign of Restrictions, Discrimination and Persecution against Christians in Burma". The author also uses the term "genocide."

18 Four cuts: cutting food supplies, finances, communication, and recruits (or "heads" as in the KNU version). On ethnic cleansing, see Mann 2005.

19 See KNU 1992: 6: "It is extremely difficult for the Karen and the Burman, two peoples with diametrically opposed views, outlooks, attitudes and mentalities, to yoke together." This view dates back to 1946; see Gravers 1999: 43.

historical persecution and mistrust of the Burmans.²⁰ Articles in the American journal *Soldier of Fortune* glorified Karen guerilla fighters as morally strong Christian anti-communists.²¹ French, British, and American mercenaries joined the KNLA briefly and the World Anti-Communist League supported the KNU. The narrative of suffering was mixed with the legend of Taw Meh Pha, the mythological Karen leader, the narrative of Israel's lost tribe and the return of the lost book and the "white brother." Jonathan Falla described this combination in an emphatic tale seen from a Christian perspective, and he clearly understood that the Buddhist Karen rank and file fighters did not share the whole narrative and that the young generation was getting tired of the long revolutionary struggle.²² Not only were the Karen classified as genuine victims in the historical process, they internalized this classification in their self-identification. Suffering and being a victim have become important ingredients of Karen identity. These narratives of grievances and sufferings flow together in Karen social memory and in one meta-narrative as a historical fulcrum for the claim to autonomy.²³

Naw Violet Cho, a Burmese Pwo Karen in exile in New Zealand, writes in her study of the Karen diaspora: "Essentially, minority ethnicities for many people are connected with the *sense of being a victim* of the SPDC [State Peace and Development Council, the junta which ruled Burma until 2010] and/or Burman domination" (my emphasis). They are portrayed as victims in the local media, they talk about their experience in order to gain *recognition* of suffering—"like a political act in itself" (Cho 2009: 30). They also tell the young

20 Lonsdale (no date), KNU 1992.

21 Seagrave 1984.

22 Falla 1994.

23 See *The Case for the Karen* 1946; KNU 1992; Lonsdale (no date)—and in statements such as "From Political Aspiration to National Consensus," KNU 2004, <http://www.karen.org/news/messages>. Halbwachs 1992 defined the concept of social memory. Recollection of the past relies on a social imaginary, which is often enforced by religious cosmology and representations.

generation about the story of resistance to the regime—sharing social suffering with the next generation.²⁴

But the voices of refugees who fled violence are different from those who stayed out of violent areas, adapted to the general state repression, and largely remained silent, as Ardeth Tawnghmung clearly explains in her work (2012). Many of these Karen, however, may have suffered from repression, and those who deserted the resistance were branded as “turn-coats who sold their national rights” (KNU 1986). They were sometimes stigmatized and victimized by their own people. Thus, the narrative of victimhood is extremely complex.

There is a shared Karen identity based on the struggle, violence, and victimhood. This identification is “produced” or generated in a long historical process involving various *orders of the state* and the making of an ethnic *plural society*.²⁵ I suggest that it is crucial to probe into the different historical orders and their meaning in order to trace the origin and development of the Karen narrative and the perpetual violence. The following is a condensed historical outline of how ethnic incompatibilities were created.

From Colonial (Dis-)order to Post-Totalitarian Constitutional Order²⁶

The most striking aspect of the Burma debate today is its absence of nuance and its singularly ahistorical nature.

—Thant Myint-U 2001: 41

24 An estimated 100,000 Karen live in Western countries. The KNU seems to hold a monopoly of victimhood amongst the majority of the refugees. Those staying in Burma away from the conflict zone may have different experiences.

25 A term J.S. Furnivall (1956) used for Burma.

26 Order here is defined as the main structure of power, rule, and rights; specific perceptions of power and rule in space and time. Disorder is not just lack of structure, but violence, insecurity, fear, uncertainty, suffering,

Military rule is gradually being replaced by what the generals in the former State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) have called “discipline-flourishing democracy” based on a constitution, which favors the military representation in the Hluttaw (parliament). It is aimed at maintaining the order created by the military since 1962 and 1988, and is basically a reaction to the disorder that continued after independence. In defining the core social and political orders through Burma’s history, there is an obvious risk of simplification. On the other hand, we may eventually get a clearer understanding of the central mechanisms of the conflicts:

- The royal order based on Buddhist cosmology
- The colonial order of “communal scheduling” or “plural society” (Furnivall)
- The post-colonial order of democratization and continued “plural society”
- The military order of unitary nationalism and totalitarian tendencies
- The post-totalitarian order of “disciplined democracy” (2008 constitution)
- The alternative moral order based on ethics in respect of life, human rights, human security: a democratic order, which protects ethnic and religious differences under a system of legal rights and justice—and perhaps a federal order²⁷

The order does not constitute a line of succession but articulates against each other in Burma’s history. In the discussion of the present new political order, the past is continuously

and social and moral decline—a sense of loss of a meaningful order. Order and disorder always include imaginaries of alternative orders—often moral orders. For a discussion of the notions of order and disorder, see Benda-Beckmann and Pirie 2007.

27 The NLD and the monks from 2007 imagine a non-violent order based on spiritual politics. Buddhist doctrine (*dhamma*) is seen as democratic and modern knowledge mixed with Buddhist ethics. See further Gravers 2012b.

brought forward to explain the present conditions. In particular, colonialism generated different conceptions of order and disorder, which still appear. Thus, I suggest that the origin of the continued violence is rooted in the clash between the colonial and the royal order in the 19th century.

The Clash between the Royal Order and the British Raj

The British conquest collided with the traditional royal order. This clash generated the ensuing orders, and the developments since independence in 1948 can be seen as a struggle, which originated in the (dis)order of the colonial times. The military has struggled to create a unitary state under one national identity and finally reset the skewed colonial order, whereas the armed ethnic organizations, or ethnic nationalities, imagine a democratic federal constitution based on the ideas from the Panglong conferences of 1946–47.

When the British colonized Burma between 1824 and 1886, the Burmese resisted fiercely. Rebellions or “dacoity” (armed gangs), as the colonial rulers called the rebellions, were seen as disorder that needed to be “pacified,” according to the British (Crosthwaite 1912). King Thibaw’s rule was seen as anti-British and “incompetent” compared to his father King Mindon’s “tolerant” rule. The Burmese historian Michael Aung-Thwin (1985) defined the colonial order and its “pacification” as: “Order without meaning.” The British colonizers did not quite understand the meaning of the royal order based on Buddhist cosmology. The British did not support the Buddhist *sangha* (monastic order) or appoint a head of the *sangha* as the kings used to. Royal power was based on karma and moral perfection combined in the term *hpoùn*.²⁸ The king had to demonstrate his charisma by renovating pagodas and giving donations to the *sangha*. If he sometimes

28 Often translated as “glory”: charisma based on religious merit. *Kan-hpoùn* is karmic power.

acted as a conqueror (*cakkavatti*) bringing prisoners of war to Burma as extra labor, he also had to demonstrate that he was a righteous ruler (*dhammaraja*) and did good deeds for his people by ruling according to the 10 moral rules of a Dhammaraja.²⁹ His subjects had to take the royal oath drinking holy water of allegiance. They contributed with labor, services, taxes, or tribute in the margins of the royal realm in return for royal protection and support to Buddhism.³⁰ Missionaries often depicted the Karen as suppressed by their Burman rulers and burdened with heavy taxation. But this was probably not necessarily a general ethnic discrimination, but rather a case where they did not enter a protecting patron-client relation with Burmese officials or where they had joined the Mon rebellions in the 18th century.³¹

The British Raj abolished the royal patron-client system and the tradition of inherited offices and appointed an administration from governor to village headman in order to have more direct control of taxes, resources, and trade. The British employed an army of mainly Indian soldiers (*sepoys*) and recruits for the Auxiliary Military Police from Christian ethnic minority groups (Karen, Kachin, and Chin). Burma was administrated under the Indian Viceroy until 1937.³² The Burmese viewed the massive immigration from India, the Christian conversion, and ethnic favoritism as subversion of their meaningful order and as a foreign disorder. In 1851, the

29 The 10 moral perfections of a righteous king (*dasa-rājadhamma*), some of which are similar to the perfection of a Buddha, include: liberality, morality, self-sacrifice, integrity, kindness, restraint and austerity, non-anger, non-violence, tolerance, forbearance, or non-obstruction.

30 The royal realm functioned according to the classic Asian *mandala* principle ("a circular orb") with a center core, provinces, and tributary states in a concentric order where manpower was the crucial resource.

31 See Ito Toshikatsu 2007: 97, 103. Higher tributes for the Karen in the delta were implemented in the 17th century. See Hanson Tadaw 1961.

32 From 1923, Burma had its own legislative council. In 1937, the Karen obtained 12 seats and had one Minister of Agriculture and Forest in Ba Maw's government. See Cady 1958 on the colonial governance.

year before the British Raj annexed the middle part of Burma, the king's governor in Rangoon accused the American Baptist missionaries of "destroying every other religion, getting all the people over to your side." The Burmese viewed a Christian as a person who had adopted an identity as foreigner (*kala* in Burmese and *khola* in Karen; *kala* is now a derogatory term used for people coming from India).³³ From this time, ethnic and religious identities gradually became more and more politicized.

While Christian Karen aided the second British annexation in 1852, Buddhist Karen went into rebellion in the delta and in the Salween area against the British Raj under millenarian prophets in 1856 to 1860. They wanted to drive out the "white foreigners" (*khola*) and believed their time to rule had come and expected a Karen king to be imminent (a *mìn laùng* in Burmese). The rebellion was a guerilla war and was difficult for the British to quell. The leader Gwae Gau was killed in Northern Thailand after attacking British subjects working in the forests belonging to the king of Chiang Mai.³⁴ The rebels also attacked Christian villages and Christian Karen were involved in the suppression of the rebellion. Many Karen were killed or lost houses and crops, and the rebellion resulted in widespread hunger—the same calamities as in recent years.

During the final and easy conquest of Burma in 1886, when the last king, Thibaw, his family, and court were exiled to India, the Christian Karen were even more active in quelling the widespread Burman rebellions which took the British by surprise. The Burmese clearly saw the conquest as more

33 Kincaid in *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 32 (1852): 69: "Christians were called kala. In the opinion of the Burmese they had become bonâfide strangers having lost their nationality," according to the Catholic Bishop Bigandet (1887: 4). On the history of conversion to Christianity, see Gravers 2007. The Karen belong to several groups: Baptist, Catholic, Anglican, and Seventh-Day Adventists, the Baptist community being the largest.

34 For details and sources on the rebellion and Karen royal imaginary, see Gravers 2001 and 2012a.

than an occupation. The Hluttaw (Council of Ministers) issued this proclamation on November 7, 1885:

The heretics the English kalas having most harshly made demands to bring about the impairment and the destructions of our religion, the violation of our national traditions and customs, and the degradation of our race ... are making preparations for war.³⁵

The British were encouraged by some of the Baptist missionaries who were militant and saw the conquest as a final fight against despotism and heathen religion (idolatry, i.e., Buddhism): "It is Buddhism in arms against Christianity," as missionary Justus H. Vinton said.³⁶ After hesitating to arm the Christian Karen, the British saw that they were loyal and distributed arms. Buddhist monks were the main leaders of the rebellions with the aim of reinstating the royal order. There was a reward on the heads of the leaders, and Christian Karen collected some of these, bringing one of the main leaders to the British.³⁷ Christian villages and chapels were burned, villagers and Karen teachers killed. However, the rebels, or dacoits, also burned Burman villages, probably because they denied them active support. The rebellions were often led by Buddhist monks because they feared that Buddhism was endangered (Ni Ni Myint 1983; Adas 1982). However, the Indian army gradually suppressed the rebellions, and in 1890, upper Burma was claimed to be "perfectly tranquil" and revenues increased five times—but resistance continued (Crosthwaite 1889: 337).

35 Ni Ni Myint 1983: 42. The question of degradation of religion and race is still a theme as in the Buddhist 969 movement defending race, Buddhism, and nation.

36 Baptist Missionary Magazine 66 (1886): 331.

37 Missionary Bunker (1902: 264 ff.) describes the capture by two women of "the great *pongyi*: who had over a thousand followers." A woman's skirt was put over the monk's head, an ultimate degrading act. In missionary narratives, the Karen were the "slaves of the Burmans," and thus liberated from suffering by Christianity.

Thus, the “pacification” of Burma turned into a deep disorder where violence escalated and became “ethnicized.” The Christian Karen saw it as a victory for their God, who was stronger than they first believed, according to missionary narrative.³⁸ Here we find an important root of future conflicts, but with a religious dimension added. For the Karen, as well as for other people in Burma, religion and ritual have traditionally been connected with political allegiance and power, as described above. This dimension is often neglected in a modern secularized thinking, and colonialism aimed at erasing this allegiance in its “civilizing” project of modernization—but as we shall see, the religious dimension is still politically important.

I suggest that these events became part of a social memory of violence and victimhood for the Karen, and a proof of Karen allegiance to the foreign colonial power for the Burmans. It was revived when 1,600 Karen and Chin from the colonial police joined the army against the Hsaya San rebellion in 1930.³⁹ In 1881, the Christian Karen pastors and American missionaries had organized a meeting of “all Karen Clans” (Daw Ka Lu, often translated: “The whole Nation”) and formed the Karen National Association (KNA). It was supposed to be non-religious and aimed at uniting the Karen nation, but in reality, it became dominated by Christians and Christian leaders and aimed at keeping the Karen away from utopian (millenarian) ideas and leaders. Alonzo Bunker describes the meeting where “the venerable prophet Meh-Teh came with elders who bore marks of former sufferings in the hands of the cruel Burman for the Deliver’s sake” (Bunker 1902: 238 ff.) The United States-educated Thra Than Bya was elected the first president. Missionaries had long solicited the

38 Vinton in *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 66 (1866): 331.

39 See Herbert 1982; Maitri Aung-Thwin 2008. 1,600 Christian Chin and Karen from the police participated in the “pacification.” The leader of the rebellion, Hsaya San—a former monk—mixed Buddhist cosmological notions and nationalism. The British sources emphasized the “traditional” aspects and dacoity as anti-colonial disorder.

idea of a Karen Nation, and created a national flag “like other book nations have” (blue with a Bible and a sword) presented in New York (see Mason 1862: 262–8). The idea was to establish an independent (Christian) Karen nation as a spearhead of civilization and Christianity in the region. From this time, they were portrayed as the “Loyal Karen of Burma” fighting Burman rebels, “the Queen’s enemies” in Bunker’s words (Bunker 1902; Smeaton 1887). For the missionaries, the Karen people were one of Israel’s lost tribes who had recovered their lost religion. The formation of the KNA in 1881 was inscribed in the narrative of suffering.

While KNA worked for more Karen influence in the new colonial order, and discussed a state with Toungoo, called “the cradle of Karen traditions,” as capital, the administration of Burma was divided in two parts: ministerial Burma (“proper Burma”) and scheduled (excluded) areas directly under the British governor. The Karen population in the delta was thus administratively separated from the Karen in the eastern hills.

Divide and Rule—Creating a “Plural Society” of Ethnic Division 1896–1947

The British Raj began to isolate the hills in 1896 via the Hill Tract Regulation Act. The idea was to regulate migration between lowland and hills in order to protect the hill minorities and the resources in this area.⁴⁰ The hill peoples were seen as primitive and backward tribes who needed protection of their culture and health. Chin and Kachin rebelled against British pacification in 1890s. The British continued the tributary relations between the 34 Shan and four Kayah princes (*sawbwa*) in so-called *sanads* (tractates) after the pacification of the Kayah rebel *sawbwa*, Saw La Paw. The Kayah princi-

40 While Burmans were kept out of the hills, the British encouraged Karen to abandon swidden agriculture and settle in the delta, the main rice-producing area; see Hanson Tadaw 1961: 499.

palities were classified as independent “native states” but under British control, that is, “indirect rule” based on customary law.

Under the administrative reforms in 1922, 41 Shan states were merged in a Frontier Area Federation directly under the British Governor and with a separate administration (Scheduled Area Administration and later Frontier Area Administration, FAA). The hill areas, 47 percent of Burma and home to about 16 percent of its population, came under the Frontier Area Administration as “scheduled areas” whereas the lowlands became “Ministerial Burma.” This segmentation was made more detailed by separating the less developed parts in schedule I. This part required assistance to develop from the revenue of Ministerial Burma. Part II consisted of the more developed Karen areas in Thaton and north of Moulmein (Hpa-an, Kyain, Kawkareik). Thus, the Karen were segmented between part I, part II, and Ministerial Burma. In Ministerial Burma, they obtained first five and later 12 seats (communal representation) for the legislative council under the Governor.

The head of FAA since 1941 was Noel Stevenson, who had a BA in anthropology from the London School of Economics.⁴¹ He published his idea of a federal Frontier Area in the anthropological journal *Man* (1945). His idea was a system of councils at four levels: village, intermediary (districts), domains, and state level, united in one national council (federal assembly) and under indirect British rule (Directory of Scheduled Area Administration) before this part could be amalgamated with Ministerial Burma when it had achieved a higher grade of development. Stevenson emphasized that the division followed administrative and not ethnic lines. The present ideas of a federation derive from Stevenson’s plan.

41 Stevenson published a monograph on the Chin in 1943 and served the FAA since 1926. During the war, he raised Karen, Chin, and Kachin levies against the Japanese.

J.S. Furnivall, colonial officer, scholar and adviser to U Nu after independence, called the British order the “plural society,” a separation of the ethnic majority and the minorities. The ethnic groups met in the marketplace but were culturally separated and lived separate communal lives under the colonial rule. There was a division “along racial lines” — “They mix but never combine.”⁴² The colonial order destroyed the Burmese social order and broke up the country into “isolated villages and individuals” under its law and order, and laissez-faire economy. The British met in their segregated clubs (The Gymkhana, the Pegu, etc.). “The club and not the home is the centre of social life,” according to Furnivall (1956: 307). Thus, there was an order for natives and one for colonizers. When the colonial order was dissolved, this system would relapse into anarchy (Furnivall 1956: 307). This is because the colonial order was forced upon Burma by violent means. Furnivall thus argued for Burmese nationalism and nationalization as rational means to prevent anarchy and disorder — perhaps not realizing that ethno-nationalist segmentation had already developed and taken root.

In 1942, the British Raj was replaced by a new violent order: the Japanese occupation supported by the Burma Independent Army (BIA) under Bogyoke Aug San and his 30 comrades. The British Army in Burma included about 2,800 Karen. Many stayed in Burma during the withdrawal of the army. The BIA suspected the Karen were still loyal to the British and had retained their weapons. Clashes between the BIA and Karen escalated in Myaungmya and Bassein (Patheingyi) in the Irrawaddy delta. The BIA killed many Karen, including a known Karen politician and his family, in the Catholic compound of the town. An estimated 1,800 Karen were killed. Further, 58 Karen villages, as well as even more Burmese

42 “As individuals they meet, but only in the market-place, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit” (Furnivall 1956: 304).

villages, were burned down after a Japanese officer was killed. However, this conflict was not merely between BIA and Christian Karen. A Buddhist Pwo Karen, Mahn Shwe Tun Kyá ("Tiger"), formed a movement with references to Karen mythological leader, Taw Mae Pha, and Buddhist cosmology—a millenarian movement with references back in time. He was said to be a prophet with supernatural powers. His movement liberated part of the delta for some months and was active in the fighting. They also received and assisted Karen soldiers sent in by parachute from India. He was executed by the Japanese in 1944, but is still remembered. Thus, Christians and Buddhist Karen had mutual experience of violence and victimhood, which has become a crucial part of the social memory among the Karen.⁴³

The British officer Major Seagrim stayed behind in the eastern hills north of Papun and was helped by Karen who became part of the Force 136 (of the Special Operations Executive). BIA and the Japanese threatened with reprisals if Seagrim did not surrender and executed 13 Karen elders. Karen elders were tortured and girls were selected as "comfort girls" for the Japanese (see Morrison 1946).

In all, the experience during the war united the Karen in mistrust against the Burmese and for a Karen State. Likewise, the Burmans came to see the Karen as more loyal to the British and less cooperative in respect to an independent social order. It affected the nationalist trend among the Karen and the Burmans respectively, and emphasized the ethnic dimension and division. "Ethnicism" came to dominate the nationalist rhetoric.

KNA was the only Karen association until 1929 when the Burma Karen National Association (BKNA) was formed by

43 See Kazuto Ikeda 2007 for details and references. The Buddhist Pwo formed the majority of Karen in the Delta and Christian Karen about 8.5%, but their intellectuals had a dominant position; see Ikeda 2007: 67, 73. The estimates of those killed vary. Many Burmese were killed and 17,000 displaced. Perhaps as many as 170 Karen and 180 Burman villages were destroyed; see Ikeda 2007: 68. Thus, there were victims on both sides.

mainly Buddhist Karen including a monk, U Pannawutha, as president, although it was not an exclusively Buddhist association. It had 22 local associations in lower Burma.⁴⁴ Little information about its activities and influence seems to be available. It appears to have included Karen, who were more inclined to cooperation with the Burmans, but it ceased to function in 1947.

In 1943, Karen Central Organization (KCO), which included all Karen organizations, was formed in order to advise Ba Maw, chief minister during part of the occupation, and to prevent further inter-ethnic violence and stop Japanese atrocities. This organization managed to establish cooperation, especially during the final part of the war when Aung San and his army (now the Burma Defense Army) changed sides and helped the British against the remnants of the Japanese army. An estimated 12,000 Karen participated in hunting Japanese stragglers. Soon after the war, the British realized that Burma had to follow India and become independent. The struggle for independence thus followed immediately after the war, which left Burma devastated. As it turned out, the negotiations for independence became complicated and generated new divisions between Burmans and the other ethnic groups as well as within the groups, including the Karen.

KNA was not allowed to function during the war. In 1945, a new KCO was formed in an attempt to include all Karen organizations, including KNA, BKNA, and the newly formed Karen Youth League or Karen Youth Organization (KYO) affiliated with Aung San's party, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL). At a meeting (called by the Karen Services League or Club, a Rangoon Karen elite organization), it was decided to send a Goodwill Mission to London in 1946. However, the Buddhists in BKNA were against sending the delegation as it could disrupt cooperation and unity, but the majority of the Karen supported the idea of an independent state. The British government reluctantly

44 See colonial document FO/643/71 on the various Karen associations.

accepted the delegation. The condition was that the delegation came to thank the King for the liberation from the Japanese—but not to conduct negotiations regarding a state. However, the delegation managed to present its claims to the Parliament and the government, as well as to the Royal Anthropological Institute.⁴⁵ They emphasized their loyalty during the war and that the Burmans had oppressed the Karen. They asked for a state as a British dominion or as part of a frontier state under the British, but not in the scheduled hill areas. They wanted admission to the sea and asked for Tenasserim and Toungoo—but not the delta. They did not preclude a future federation with Burma. They claimed that 33% were Christian (15–20% is a more realistic figure) and that their way of life did not permit a “happy cooperation with the Burmans.” The delegation consisted of influential Karen leader Sidney Loo Nee, KCO president Saw Tha Din, Saw Po Chit (barrister) and Saw Ba U Gyi, barrister and coming president of KNU—all from the wealthy, Christian Sgaw Karen urban elite.

In a memorandum from 1946 distributed in Britain (with the pamphlet *The Case for the Karen*), it is emphasized that the Karen had preserved themselves as a race distinct from the Burmese and other peoples: “and an intuitive feeling born of tradition and prophesy that their White Brother would come to them for help [*sic*] had long taken root and this prophesy had to a large degree been fulfilled in the advent of the British rulers and the American and European missionaries ...” There is a reference to the Karen as a lost tribe of Israel, as some of the missionaries believed.⁴⁶ In interviews in 1970, Saw Tha

45 See the pamphlet: *After India—Burma? Case for the Karen* (London, 1946), 4, Mss. Eur. E252/22 (Sir John Clague Collection). See also M/4/3023 *Karens Political Future 1945–1947* and Gravers 1996. On Karen political history, see Smith 1999 and Thawngmumung 2012 for two comprehensive and detailed studies of the complex history.

46 Missionary sources are used as historical documentation, such as Mason 1862, and Toungoo is claimed to have founded by the Karen 600 years ago. The memorandum claimed that the Karen were the first ethnic group to enter Burma.

Din explained that Christianity was the recovered religion of the Karen, i.e. the knowledge and script they had lost way back in history, and not merely a conversion to a foreign religion. This is a significant point in Karen social memory. The significance of this narrative and imaginary is exemplified in Falla's book and in Zoya Phan's beautiful narrative of her childhood in the resistance and victimhood as a refugee receiving aid from western NGOs: "The elders—grandma among them—started talking about the 'younger brother' coming back to help the Karen, just as the legend predicted."⁴⁷

The memorandum from 1946 further describes Burman suppression and the atrocities during the war, and claim that self-determination (or dominion status) is needed in order to preserve Karen culture and identity. The Karen emphasize that they have attained the same national consciousness ("an inborn spirit of nationalism") and political evolution as the Burmans had—and thus, being loyal to the British, have a natural and legitimate claim to a state.⁴⁸ At this stage, the Karen did not preclude being part of a federation with the Frontier Areas and Burma.

The British government did not give the delegation any promise or clear reply and in January 1947, Aung San arrived in London with his official Burmese delegation. This further created division in the Karen leadership. In 1947, the KCO was split. The Karen National Union (KNU) was formed and the more militant Karen took over. Burma Karen National Association (Buddhist) and the newly formed Karen Youth Organization (KYO), which was close to Aung San and the

47 Falla 1991; Zoya Phan 2009: 151. Phan is the daughter of the assassinated KNU leader Padoh Mahn Sha Phan, and her story about how violence, suffering, and stigma as a refugee become part of a family's everyday life is important for understanding how identity becomes ingrained with violence.

48 Memorandum: Historical Background (Mss. Eur. E252/22). In *The Case for the Karen*, the claim for a state is more explicitly stated. Saw Po Chit in a pamphlet, *Karen and the Karen State*, 1946 (M/4/3023), defined Karen national character in a booklet as totally contrary to Burman national identity, and thus impossible to unite.

Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, were not included in the KNU and cooperated with the Burmans. KYO was actually a mix of Buddhist and Christian Karen, most of them Pwo as the leader Mahn Ba Khaing, who became part of Aung San's interim government and was killed with Aung San in 1947. Saw Ba U Gyi became the President of the KNU, and the KNU now demanded a state that also included parts of the delta plus extra seats in the parliament and 25 percent of ministers—unrealistic demands. The Karen, however, never received a reply from London to their proposal, and a Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO) was formed in June 1948.⁴⁹

Up to independence, the main theme in Karen nationalism was a narrative of suffering and political grievances, as well as inter-ethnic and cultural incompatibility, but their claims of territory show that the Karen politicians also cared about territorial resources, access to the sea, and economic viability of a future state.⁵⁰

The Panglong Conferences 1946–47: Continuation of the Colonial (Dis)order

It is not elections that are going to decide the future of
Burma, but the gun.

—Ba Maw in 1947, cited in Ko Oung 1993: 68

In 1946, there were still speculations that the Frontier Areas would not become part of an independent Burma. Shan

49 During many hours of interviews with Saw Tha Din in 1970–71, he, like Saw Ba U Gyi, deplored that the British did not give a clear answer in 1946. Saw Tha Din was against an uprising—but considered it inevitable due to the lack of British response and the feeling of betrayal and anger among the young leaders. However, there was no doubt about the British position. The delegation may not have wanted to be seen as a failure and insisted on not having been informed.

50 See documents cited in note 46.

Princes (*saopha* or *sawbaw*) arranged the first of the now famous *Panglong* (in Laikha State) events in the Shan States in 1946. It was mainly a cultural event but included political talks. Stevenson's aim was to pressure the 34 Shan princes and other ethnic leaders from the FAA to join a democratic federation. However, U Nu and the Burman delegation from the AFPFL complained that the British distorted history and divided the ethnic groups in order to secure the FAA as a British dominion. Before the second Panglong conference in February 1947, and after Bogyoke Aung San's negotiations in London, Stevenson was recalled to London. He was bitterly attacked by Aung San and accused of promoting ethnic separation.⁵¹ Stevenson had supported the Karen delegation to London, but he was also blamed by the British for not responding to the Karen requests for a state and for talking about a "Karenistan" as a dominion. Stevenson was demonized by all parties except the ethnic nationalities for whom he is still a hero.

At the 1947 conference, a Supreme Council of the United Hill Peoples was formed before Aung San joined the conference. Shan, Kachin, and Chin sent delegates. Many groups, such as Wa, Lahu, Naga, and others, were not represented, that is, they were represented by the Shan princes. Most of the Karen population lived outside the FAA and only three Karen from the Salween area (in FAA) came. The agreement as it reads today is a very loose document of intentions, including economic aid and "democratic rights." The sentence where autonomy is mentioned reads: "Full autonomy in internal administration for the Frontier Area is accepted in principle." Shan and Kayah obtained the right to a future secession in the 1947 constitution, and Kachin asked for this right. However, this right would only become effective after the Kachin state territory had been demarcated, and the Chin opted to stay in Burma and did not get a state. Kayah were

51 Tinker 1983–84, vol. 2: 175.

not in the FAA and maintained that they were an independent ("native") state as in the colonial order.⁵²

Although the Karen were not part of the Panglong Agreement, it is one of the primary sources of the social memory in Burma; for the ethnic nationalities, it has a high symbolic value as "the spirit of Panglong," i.e., the time of dialogue and compromise. For the military, who until recently completely rejected federalism as a colonial intervention, it symbolizes the perpetuation of the colonial disorder. This disagreement is a core obstacle in the present ceasefire negotiations.⁵³

Panglong and the ensuing Frontier Area Committee of Enquiry revealed the internal division among the Karen. For example, the Karen from Salween district under the FAA formed the Union Karen Organization and opted for inclusion in the Union of Burma, much to the consternation of the KNU.⁵⁴

After Panglong, the hope of the Karen for an autonomous state faded and the issue was referred to a special commission in 1948. The newly formed KNU opted to boycott the elections while KYO participated. KNU felt the British were deserting them and that armed struggle was inevitable, as Saw Tha Din explained to me in 1970. The year of independence, 1948, saw the Karen take Thaton district and loot local treasures near Moulmein in a "dacoit-like" action. Later that

52 On the Panglong Conference, see the file M/4/2811 in the Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library and Tinker 1983–84. The best source on Panglong is the volume published by Universities Historical Research Centre, Yangon, 1999. See also Walton 2008.

53 Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has endorsed the Panglong Agreement. Interestingly, in July 2012, the speaker of the lower house, Thura Shwe Man, said that "a federal union is inevitable, but would not arrive any time soon" (*The Irrawaddy*, 18 July). This was the first time a member of the former military regime has spoken positively about a federation, but the impression remains that the military generally rejects the idea.

54 See Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry (M/42854 OIOC, British Library). The Salween Karen were active in Force-136 during the war and wanted a district with internal autonomy.

year, there was an attack on the Christian community in Palaw, Tenasserim by a Burmese auxiliary defense group (*sitwundan*). 80 Karen were killed in the church on Christmas evening and the killings spread to other villages. Evidence of this event is scarce and it is not clear who were behind it, but an estimated 300 Karen died (Tinker 1967: 9; Thawngmung 2012: 43). This event, however, confirmed the identity as victims among the Karen, and the local incident was transposed to the national level as the signal of civil war. In January, the Karen forces occupied Insein, site of the Baptist Theological Seminary, in the outskirts of Rangoon. KNU President Saw Ba U Gyi had formulated the four principles of the Karen revolution, which are still adhered to by the KNU: surrender is out of question; recognition of a Karen State; the Karen shall retain their arms; and the Karen shall decide their own political destiny.

From 1946–48, the Karen Rifles in the British army formed three battalions of 2,400 soldiers. However, the commander in-chief of the Burmese army, deputy chief of staff, and the head of Air Force, all Karen, remained neutral in 1949, but many Karen soldiers joined the rebels and an estimated 10,000 Karen were armed at this time. The Burmese Army, now commanded by General Ne Win, who mistrusted the Karen, managed to arrange a brief ceasefire and amass more forces before evicting the Karen Defense Organization from Rangoon and other towns. Again, the Karen felt betrayed. KNU still refer to these events as the beginning of the “Karen revolution” and claim a historical legitimacy as representatives of all Karen.⁵⁵ What happened was that the Karen were divided among those who supported armed struggle because they mistrusted U Nu and Ne Win after the broken ceasefire, those who supported a negotiated settlement, and the silent majority not directly engaged in the struggle. All groups came to suffer more or less from the ensuing violence and mistrust.

55 KNU 2004. On the Karen and other insurrection in 1948, see *Burma and the Insurrection 1949*.

The Karen had been divided internally since 1947. KNU was split in an east and a west section after Ba U Gyi was ambushed by the army and killed in 1950. One KNU leader, Saw Hunter Tha Mwe, declared that he was a traditional lord of the land and later surrendered to Ne Win. KNU was further divided between left (Maoist) and right wings (anti-communist, pro-USA). The socialist Mahn Ba Zahn was replaced as president by Bo Mya, a conservative and autocratic leader, who died in 2006. Many urban Karen supported three political parties during the relatively democratic periods in the 1950s. Political and religious allegiances as well as personal struggles have divided the Karen since.⁵⁶ The class divide was also significant: most KNU leaders in 1946–48 were educated, middle-class, and relatively wealthy. Thus there was a huge distance between hill Animist Karen peasants in Salween district, and the urban Baptist teachers and traders from Rangoon—and this difference in social and cultural capital is still a significant part of the internal Karen divide.

The constitution of 1947 did not materialize as a federal structure, and the friction of orders would continue after independence. In order to summarize the historical process, it is possible to briefly delineate the rationale of the colonial order.

The colonial administration of Burma valued the relatively free subjects in the imperial economy, divided by ethnicity and religion and living in separate communities. Ethnic groups were classified after modern anthropological theory in races and tribes and in stages of evolution. This knowledge was collected in censuses since 1872 and published. Resources were listed and maps were drawn during expeditions by officials consulting local elites, and customs were registered. Then, borders were drawn on maps. The colonial rule used

56 See Smith 1991 and Thawngghmung 2012 for details on the internal conflicts in the KNU.

applied anthropology (cf. Stevenson) as techniques of domination in their politics of ethnic difference and organized these in space and time. This “colonial governmentality” based on modern knowledge served the imperial economy and sovereignty in a combination of local freedom, reason, and only using force when needed. It was a class hierarchy combined with a kind of village self-governance during which villagers could be conscribed to do public works after a law from 1907 (still used by the army). However, colonial suppression of the traditional order and its divide and rule, resisted by the Burmans, carried the roots of previous violent clashes.⁵⁷ Nationalist movements organized by the young monks in the first half of the 20th century is an attempt to reinstate a moral order based on *dhamma*, but in a modern nationalist version in which protection of not only Buddhism but of race, language, and nation was crucial. They sent *dhamma*-lecturers on missions country-wide and demonstrated against immigration from India.⁵⁸ Nationalism in its secular form, an antidote to colonialism, became the main ideology of Aung San and his 30 comrades; Aung San cited Stalin’s definition of a nation. Nationalism would keep independent Burma from ethnic fragmenting.⁵⁹ However, nationalism and ethno-nationalism became militarized after independence, and continued the schimogenesis and friction of orders.

Failed Democracy and Totalitarian Military Order since 1962

Immediately before independence, political frictions created personal conflicts and splits, which have dominated politics

57 David Scott (2005) uses the term *colonial governmentality* following Foucault. On the club, see Furnivall 1956: 307 and Gravers 1999: 4.

58 See Maung Maung 1980, Schober 2011 and Gravers 2012b for the Buddhist nationalist struggles for a moral order.

59 I have discussed the forms of nationalism and their origin in greater detail in Gravers 1999 and 1996.

in all camps since the 1940s. Aung San was murdered by his conservative opponent U Saw, and U Nu became leader of AFPFL. When colonialism ended, Burma was devastated by the war, with a plural (dis)order without a powerful democratic center and without an administration, which could secure an inclusive accommodation of ethnic aspirations and security. Democratization was prevented by a state of exception and use of military force to prevent fragmentation and dissolution of the Union. Rebellions were started by the communists, the Karen, and the Peoples' Volunteer Organization (former soldiers of Aug San's Burma Defense Army). The remnants of colonial disorder became a manifest part of independent Burma. Insurrections and the split of the AFPFL in 1956 dominated the democratic period.⁶⁰ Thus, national unity became the overriding concern (Callahan 1998: 2005). General Ne Win, the Army, and the socialist wing of AFPFL reacted against U Nu who attended a seminar on federalism organized by Shan and Kayah politicians in Rangoon.⁶¹ In 1961, Kachin students, frustrated by U Nu's promotion of Buddhism as the state religion and neglect of development in their state, formed the Kachin Independence Organization and demanded independence, and began a rebellion.⁶² There were rumors that the Shan and Kayah intended to use their rights to secession soon. In 1962, General Ne Win and the army took power in a coup and jailed U Nu. The army wanted to preserve the union and reacted. At this time, the army had developed into an independent and strong organization running the largest business organization in Burma, the Defense Services Institute, and appeared as *the* defender of

60 See Butwell 1963: chap. 14. The AFPFL was riddled with political and personal conflicts.

61 See Lehman 1981. U Nu had also promised an Arakan (Rakhine) and a Mon State. He gave amnesty to communists and other rebels, and he fired nine brigade commanders in 1961; see Callahan 2005: 188. Thus, a clear divide between U Nu and the army had developed, and U Nu transferred power to General Ne Win from 1950 to elections in 1960, won by U Nu.

62 On the Kachin and their history, see Mandy Sadan 2013.

national unity. Ne Win can be said to have attempted to resurrect order in a postcolonial disorder.⁶³ However, the coup was also driven by his personal power ambitions. Space does not allow detailed analyses of General Ne Win's rule, but it is obvious that he used military force and violence in his so-called four-cuts strategy (cutting supplies of food, intelligence, finances, and recruits) in order to annihilate what was seen as the roots of disorder, that is ethnic rebels. It was the beginning of internal displacement, escalating violence, and thus of ethnic cleansing. The army launched a major offensive in the Karen State in 1984 and thousands fled to Thailand. The former colonial Frontier Areas, now considered as an equal part of the Union, became a war zone. In this zone, psychological warfare was conducted against communists and rebels in the Dhammarantaya ("the Buddhist doctrine in danger"), a Buddhist mission program amongst Christians, Muslims, and other groups. Ne Win considered the KNU as an organization largely supported by foreign interests and a perpetuation of the colonial disorder. He demanded that the ethnic militias surrender their arms and that the ethnic groups integrate into the union.⁶⁴ Federalism was out of question in Ne Win's unitary order. Ne Win's Burmese way to Socialism was basically a militarized nationalism including nationalization of the economy and isolation of Burma.⁶⁵

From the Karen point of view, things looked different. Without political recognition, they would have to continue their struggle. This approach changed somewhat after Ne Win's resignation in 1988, the violent suppression of demonstrations, and the Army's post-election coup against the NLD victory in 1990. In 1989, a Border Area Development program

63 Aung-Thwin 1985: 247.

64 In 1982, Ne Win and the socialist government passed a law on citizenship which demanded that a person needed to have ancestors in Burma before 1823 (first colonial annexation) in order to obtain full citizenship. They must be classified as belonging to an indigenous group (*tai yin tha*) and not merely a self-described ethnic group (*luo myo*).

65 See Burma Socialist Programme Party 1963.



Gate to Myang Gyi Ngu monastic community, Karen State. BGF guards control visitors for guns, drugs, alcohol and meat. DKBA has been ousted from the place. U Thuzana's photo is in the middle (Photo courtesy of Mikael Gravers).

under a Ministry of Progress for Border Areas and National Races was established. The hills were again classified as backward and marginal as in the colonial order. The Ministry constructed roads, power plants, and schools in order to develop and pacify the insurgent areas. During the 1990s, General Khin Nyunt managed to negotiate ceasefires with many armed ethnic organizations—except with the KNU—probably in an attempt to prevent an alliance between the NLD and the ethnic armed groups.⁶⁶ Khin Nyunt fell from power and was arrested in 2004, and Senior General Than Shwe dismantled his powerful intelligence organization. This was a time when Burma's society and state functions were

66 On the ceasefires, see Tom Kramer 2010, and Zaw Oo and Win Min 2007.

militarized and the military rule turned increasingly totalitarian.⁶⁷ Nationalism and nationalist rhetoric dominated in slogans such as “Non-disintegration of the nation” or “national solidarity,” “uplifting the patriotic spirit,” and “uplifting the morale and morality of the nation.” Morality means loyalty to the army.⁶⁸ The Myanmar nation of 135 Myanmar races was meant to be a cultural corporate unit of “One nation/race, one language, and one religion.” Thus, emphasis on a forced unity and the “armed peace” of the ceasefires did not solve the political inter-ethnic incompatibilities of the previous times.

The Karen under Military Rule: Armed Struggle and Religion

Segmentation, personal conflicts originating in differences of class, ethnicity, and religion and internal struggle for power have dominated the Karen. Communication between religious denominations and between hill and urban Karen has often been difficult.⁶⁹ There are wide gaps of experience and ideas between the many subgroups. The Karen are not a homogeneous ethnic group, as perceived by their missionary and colonial supporters (and some scholars as well). The Karen acknowledge common customs (*ta a lu a la*), but the customs are expressed in different religious rituals, languages, cultural variations, and local experiences. To convert in Karen is to take a new ritual, but it is not seen as a change of custom, cf. the view that Christianity is a retrieved religion. Sharing customs, however, did not mean that the Karen ever constituted a united ethnic community. However, they share the imaginary and the aspirations of a new united moral community amidst the divide. In August every year, Karen

67 See Fink 2010 and Skidmore 2003 on the regime, and Gravers 2012b for a discussion of totalitarianism.

68 Than Shwe has imitated royal symbolism and used Buddhism to legitimize his nationalist dictatorial rule. Gravers 2012b.

69 See Thawnhmung 2012: 117.

refugees all over the world congregated, in traditional Karen dresses, to celebrate the wrist-tying (*khi djue*) ceremony. This former animist ritual, combined with animal sacrifice, of recalling the soul attacked by evil spirits and tying it has become a pan-Karen national ritual and a collective healing of sufferings. Here a former religious ritual has turned into an element of modern national Karen customs.

The Christian community is composed of several groups. The largest is the Baptist Convention, which is divided between the Sgaw Karen Baptist Convention, and the Pwo Karen Baptist Conference. The Sgaw Baptist have a dominant role and run the important Theological Seminary in Yangon, a crucial center of education and of Sgaw Karen culture—Thawnhmung calls it a carrier of Karen culture. The Baptist congregations are ethnic, whereas the Anglicans, Catholics, and Seventh-Day Adventists are often a mix of ethnic groups.⁷⁰ Some Seventh-Day Adventists in the Karen State are allied with and protected by the Buddhist monk U Thuzana, whose vegetarian practices they share.

A close relationship between the KNU and the Baptist Church is obvious in their work among refugees. The refugee camps in the Karen State and in Thailand are dominated by various KNU-affiliated organizations.⁷¹ Alexander Horstmann refers to a Sgaw pastor, who talks about “God’s mysterious plan to liberate the Karen from sufferings and return to their promised land” (2011: 97). God’s order is fighting and suffering. In this way, religion is important in the reflections on victimhood among the Karen, and Christianity is the fulcrum of the present interim order. Refugees are an important part of KNU’s constituency. About 106,800 are IDPs in the Karen State; 140,000 are registered refugees in Thailand where humanitarian aid is dwindling and they are under

70 Thawnhmung 2012: 67.

71 Karen Refugee Council, Karen Youth organization, Committee for Internally Displaced People, Karen Organization for Relief and Development, and others.

pressure from the Thai military government to return.⁷² Several thousands are living outside camps—partly migrants, partly refugees, and often Buddhist Karen. In a way, victimhood has been sustained by NGO supplies from international donors, and aid may even have prolonged the conflict (see South 2011). It has been argued that the humanitarian aid to Karen refugees may have been crucial in maintaining the conflict because the camps became the main constituency for the KNU. However, many refugees have lived with a hope of obtaining asylum in the West and a chance to remake their lives far away from the violence. Those with education and contacts have succeeded and at least 70,000 Karen live abroad. Because of this dire background and due to a lack of resources, KNU has realized that it is time for a political solution. The long war has left numerous Karen deeply traumatized and a peace must provide some retribution in order to reduce suffering. For example, there are entire villages consisting of disabled former soldiers and their families without livelihoods or aid.⁷³

As explained above, religion is an important source of allegiance and identification. It is the fulcrum for the social memory of suffering but also a dimension of conflicts.⁷⁴ The charismatic monk, U Thuzana, and the formation of the DKBA in 1994 is the most significant internal divide among the Karen and it split KNU in two. Many Buddhist Karen

72 The number of IDPs seems to be dwindling. TBBC 2011 estimate the figure is 89,000.

73 The author visited such a village with a brand new school donated by Norway, but with food rations ending, no work, and traumatized alcoholic men. See also Karen Women's Organization (2004) on the use of rape by the army.

74 The Buddhist and Animist Karen comprise the majority of the Karen (ca. 80 percent). Animists often visit Buddhist temples. Besides, there are many hybrid sects or movements such as the Leke, Talakhoun (Telakhon), Duwae, Bo Pike San, and Phu Ta Khe. Most of them are millenarian, waiting for the arrival of the next Buddha, Ariya Metteyya. See Hayami 2011, Kwanchewan Buadaeng 2008, and Gravers 2001. Talakhon had a conflict with the KNU in the 1960s and KNU killed their leader.



Former MI chief, General Khin Nyunt, pays respect to U Thuzana in Myaing Gyi Ngu (mural in MGN) (Photo courtesy of Mikael Gravers).

were front soldiers in the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), and the hill Buddhist and Animist Karen were an important source of recruits and tax for the KNU in the border region. When the Sgaw Karen monk U Thuzana, a former KNLA runner, began to mobilize the Buddhist Karen for peace, the KNU leadership became highly suspicious. The KNU believed he was acting for the Burmese Army and betraying the KNU. How could the monk finance the construction of a huge monastery in Myaing Gyi Nu on the Salween River and feed thousands of internally displaced persons? U Thuzana had a prophecy that after constructing 50 white pagodas, peace would come. Later, he had a vision that he had been a King over “Karen land” in Thailand and Burma in a previous existence, signifying that he could be a future leader of the Karen and unite them in what he believed was an old Karen Buddhist civilization. He mobilized and

converted the Animist Karen in the hills, the backwater of KNU, and began constructing a white pagoda above the KNU HQ in Manerplaw. Buddhist Karen complained that they took the brunt of the fighting in the KNLA while the leaders led safe and rich lives sending their children to the US or UK. They also complained of discrimination against Buddhism by the KNU leadership. After fighting took place near the pagoda, Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) was founded with the monk as patron. The formation of DKBA (estimated at 4,000 to 6,000 soldiers, two times the KNLA) was a hard blow to the KNU, who lost its base areas in Burma. During the 1990s, DKBA soldiers in alliance with the Burmese army attacked Christian villages and refugee camps in Thailand, where they engaged in looting, and kidnapped and killed Christian Karen. In recent years, a faction of the DKBA and KNU have cooperated and held meetings, while a major part of the DKBA became Border Guard Force (BGF) and integrated the Burmese Army. U Thuzana has managed to collect huge donations from influential Thai businesspeople who invest in both religious merit and in border trade. Donations have largely been used to establish schools and clinics, to build roads and bridges, and to construct pagodas as well. It is not clear if some of the money has been used to supply the DKBA. However, the monk provides vegetarian food to his followers. He created a new moral order with the aim of generating peace and to alleviate sufferings (*dukkha*) parallel to the Christian-dominated Karen nationalism.⁷⁵

After a fierce campaign against the KNLA in 2009, which generated a new flow of refugees, the DKBA, under U Thuzana's influence, has forged an alliance with the KNU. A DKBA officer I interviewed said that he regretted that Karen had been fighting Karen since 1994 and said there should be unity.⁷⁶ DKBA has been forced out of Myaing Kyi

75 For details, see Gravers (forthcoming).

76 During an interview in January 2012, KNU leader David Tackabaw assured me that KNU and DKBA collaborated and that there was no conflict between Buddhist Pwo and Christian Sgaw.

Ngu by the army and redeployed north of Salween River. Some of the former DKBA, now BGF units of the army, are not loyal to U Thuzana, and their officers act like warlords and focus on border trade. Thus, U Thuzana seems to have lost some of his previous power. The subalterns always follow their leaders, a DKBA major told me. They form patron-client networks. Thus, a combination of religion, economy, politics, and personal loyalties as much as ethnicity are the ingredients of trust networks in this conflict. The problem with the internal divide of the Karen, especially in the Karen State, is that it sometimes has generated violent conflicts within the larger conflict.

Religion is not a generator of conflict in itself, and religious networks form strong trust networks and moral communities. However, when they are ethicized and politicized and articulated with economic interests, they tend to become more exclusive and polarized. The long conflict has created a shadow economy, or “ceasefire capitalism.”⁷⁷ The army has granted business and mining licenses as well as land for rubber plantations to its ceasefire partners. Ethnic Armed Groups have demanded taxes and recruits from their local supporters. Karen informants have complained that they were often taxed by the DKBA, the KNU, and the army. Together with ethnicity and religion, ceasefire capitalism turns into a predatory order and an extension of the war violence. It also generated further splits among the Karen.

Fragmented Order—Emerging Unity?

Amidst this split between Christians and Buddhists, more splinter groups from the KNU appeared after 1994, such as the Karen Peace Council, formed by an officer and a former member of KNU’s Central Committee, who was excluded and disgruntled. Many of those who deserted obtained a ceasefire and lucrative economic deals with the Burmese army, including personal pay and cars. Among these are Tay

77 Woods 2011.

Lay and Nehr Day, sons of Bo Mya, who lost influence after their father's death, and former Minister of Forestry in the KNU, Pado Aung San, who defected with a unit in 1997 and is doing business south of Hpa-an. The same year, a battalion from Brigade 6 signed an agreement with the army and established the Karen Peace Force. Soldiers and officers were tired of fighting and civilian suffering. They obtained a mine license and rubber plantations. KNU leader David Thackerbaw explained that these deserters all took large amounts of money, indicating that the harm done to the KNU is not merely political, but also financial. The BGF units seem to be more interested in taxes and business. One prominent commander, Chit Thu, lives in a Beverly Hills-style villa in Myawaddi. Greed has replaced political grievances among some participants. Thus, the scenario for peace process and a future political settlement is complicated by such interpersonal fragmentation and economic greed. This fragmentation is a sign of "conflict fatigue," dwindling support and resources. The Burmese army has exploited the divide and obtained more control of the frontier zone in the Karen state.

KNU is further split internally between the skeptical faction—that largely mistrusts the intentions of the government and of most Burmans—and a more collaborative and pragmatic faction. The leadership of elder Karen in KNU emphasizes how they have been chided and tricked in previous negotiations and demands a solution which includes all ethnic groups and a federal constitution. Many in the younger generations of Karen are tired of the conflict and hope for a political solution. However, many look upon the new semi-democratic order with mistrust. They do not even trust Aung San Suu Kyi—the Burman lady.⁷⁸

After the elections in 2010, the KNU remain skeptical about the intentions of the government. They fear the strat-

78 Aung San Suu Kyi 1991: vii wrote that nationalism is part of the Burmese ethos and that the Burmese value cultural integrity more than ethnic identity—sometimes resulting in cultural chauvinism. The Karen skepticism refers to this point and extends to her as well.

egy is to take the resources from the Karen and criticize what they call “developmentalism,” i.e., that development is a trick to take possession of natural resources. Among KNU, the hardliners in the leadership believed that the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI), which was established between the Norwegian government, Myanmar Egress, and the Myanmar Peace Centre, is part of this strategy in order to support the government negotiator Aung Min. Some in the KNU consider the peace initiative as a Burma Trojan horse aimed at grabbing their resources or buying peace with development, although the KNU leadership seems to have been consulted from the start. The whole struggle increasingly focuses on natural and economic resources. The “hardliners” also accuse the MPSI of knowing too little about the Karen and of moving too fast.⁷⁹ However, MPSI has initiated relevant projects in terms of trust-building and focused on urgent problems such as military land grabbing for rubber plantations.⁸⁰

Three Karen parties participated in the elections in 2010. The most important is the Phloun-Sgaw Democratic Party, with a broad support in the Karen State. It obtained nine seats in the parliament and four in the Karen State assembly. Its patron is a Buddhist monk, Ashin Pinnya Thami (Taungalay Hsayadaw) in Hpa-an, who is organizing education and development. However, Pinnya Thami does not cooperate with U Thuzana and considers him a monk who merely collects money to build his own empire. Karen Democratic and Development Party is based in the Karen State (DKBA-related), whereas Kayin People’s Party (Yangon and Delta) is

79 On the peace initiative, see Ashley South 2012. He is working for the MPSI and urges the Non-State Armed Organizations to make peace now or risk being marginalized. He also explains that the ethnic skepticism toward the MPSI is legitimate, but could undermine the whole peace process (South 2013: 25). This skepticism is shared by the Kachin according to an official interviewed in Yangon, October 2012. An example of this skepticism is an interview with Karen refugees in the *Irrawaddy*, December 31, 2012.

80 See MPSI report 2014. The Karen are deeply worried about major infrastructure projects such as the Hatgyi dam on the Salween River.

a party of former government officials, and has urban Karen support in the Union Karen community among those who desire accommodation with the state and the new government. A newly formed Karen National Party based in the Delta seems to be mainly Pwo Karen.

Since 2011, a Karen Affairs Council has worked to reconcile differences amongst the Karen and give advice on the peace process. Another important step to reconcile the internal disagreements among the Karen was taken in March 2013 when 400 delegates met in Hpa-an to discuss the peace process. Leaders who formerly refused to meet seem to have joined this event. This event was followed by the formation of a 37-member Karen Unity and Peace Committee (KUPC). The leader is a Buddhist monk, and the aim is to strengthen political unity and cooperation among the various organizations, including religious and military. It is an alliance between Karen in the Karen State and in Yangon and the Delta. This could be an important step toward internal Karen reconciliation.⁸¹

When the KNU signed its first ceasefire in January 2012, it became clear that the leadership was deeply divided. The negotiations that followed in April 2012 seem to have been better prepared and the paper circulated is a detailed document, which points to a more sustainable agreement (Keenan 2012). There is massive pressure from Karen civil society for a change and a new order. Negotiations with the SPDC took place from 2003 to 2006, and KNU was offered three areas they could administer. The army was not willing to withdraw and no political solution was included as the KNU persistently has demanded. The late President Bo Mya feared that ceasefire would split the KNU and ended the negotiations. However, the 15th KNU congress in November 2012 saw a change in the leadership. General Mutu Say Poe, KNU President, and those in favor of a peace agreement dominate the leadership, but the division remains. The initiative thus

81 *Karen News*, April 4, 2013.

provoked more mistrust in the beginning, but is now moving toward a national ceasefire.

KNU is a member of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) and the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC). UNFC, the strongest of the organizations, demands a federal constitution and part of a ceasefire agreement. There can be no peace without a political solution.⁸² In 2013, representatives of 18 of the 19 ethnic armed groups met in Laiza in The Kachin State to discuss the nationwide ceasefire and a future political dialogue. They have outlined 11 points and among these are the recognition of the Panglong Agreement, formation of federal armed forces, building of mutual trust, basic rights for ethnic nationalities, peace, and a political dialogue.⁸³

The most serious stumbling blocks to a nationwide ceasefire with all armed ethnic organizations are now appearing: the army demands that all ethnic armed groups (EAG) come under army command. However, they want to keep their weapons as protection until a full federal constitution, including a federal army materializes. The army demands that the ethnic organization respect the constitution and is not ready to discuss a federal constitution. It also demands that the ethnic organizations respect existing laws including a colonial law from 1908 and one from the state emergency in the 1950s making their EAG illegal insurgent organizations. The EAG, on their side, maintain that they are “revolutionary resistance organizations” and thus want profound changes. The monitoring of the army and the EAGs estimated that 100,000 men are not settled. The army, which is not under parliamentary control in the constitution, and the government, claim a national Myanmar sovereignty in all matters,

82 The ENC reviewed the discussion of Panglong and federalism. See, for example, Yawngghwe and Sakhaong 2004. The Panglong initiative focuses on democracy and non-violence, as well as on a federal constitution in this well-argued publication. ENC is supported by the EU and viewed with some skepticism by some KNU leaders.

83 On the peace process, see South 2012; Gravers and Ytzen 2014.

although minority languages are now formally recognized if not yet taught in schools.

In March 2014, the government launched a census, the first since 1980. It was prepared by the UN with a very late consultation of the ethnic nationalities who protested. It is based on the ethnic and religious classification used by the British (1872–1931) transferred into the list of 135 Myanmar races. The Karen demanded that they register as “Karen,” not Kayin, the Burmese term, which the Karen consider derogatory. Once again, the colonial order has interfered in the present conjuncture.

Conclusion: Beyond Colonial Heritage?

As a Karen researcher, I want to learn and produce knowledge in a way that does not preserve relations of colonization but rather addresses the injustices of the past.⁸⁴

In his speech on Karen Martyr’s day, August 12, 2013 (the day Saw Ba U Gyi was assassinated), Saw Mutu Say Poe talked about the sacrifices of Karen leaders and civilians made in order to secure freedom from oppression during the last 64 years. He also repeated the principles of Ba U Gyi—never to surrender and give up arms. Arms are synonymous with protection. Thus, the memory of past violence is still determining, and disarmament and demobilization seem impossible in the near future. The orders of the past are still influencing minds and matters in the complex dynamics of the current transition: colonial ethnicism and ethno-nationalism clashes with military nationalism; Buddhism divided between a democratic and a nationalist version—all articulate in the present situation. These orders have carried accumulated violence, suffering, and incompatibilities along in a process, which increasingly has run its own course. The result

84 Violet Cho (2014) in a beautiful piece on Karen poems and the ambivalence of being Pwo Karen writing Sgaw constructed by missionaries.

is a general mistrust and fear on all sides, which blocks a political dialogue. This mistrust and fear is founded on the imaginary of ethnic and religious incompatibilities deriving from the violent orders since colonial times. Thus, the Panglong Agreement could be a difficult point of departure for a new order. A genuine democratic order has to accommodate the ethnic and religious identities as equal and protected, but subsumed under a secular non-ethnicized constitution and laws. The developments from colonial rule to the present have created a highly fragmented order in which ethnic, religious, and economic interests and politics are ingrained with violence. In order to minimize these incompatibilities, the most urgent task is to get beyond violence, fear, and mistrust.

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